Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

President: Oliver Hamlin (o. 283-6822; h. 284-1446)
Editor: Shirley Thomson (o. 284-1166; h. 284-2995)

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April 1991

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It soon will be time for our annual potluck dinner meeting again which marks the end of another year of activities and the beginning of a new term for our Board of Directors. Mark your calendars for Tuesday, May 14, and try to join us at the Lafayette Veterans Hall for another enjoyable experience of food, fellowship and entertainment. We will have an outstanding speaker this year – Nilda Rego, writer of the "Remember When" feature articles in the *Contra Costa Times* – on the subject of Contra Costa history. Look for the format and details of our dinner meeting on page three of this newsletter. Richard Johnson will be in charge of the event again this year. It's lots of fun.

I would like to thank our Board members for their enthusiasm and hard work during the year. Many members of the Board will continue on next year, but our Treasurer, Nancy Holtzapple, will be going off the Board this year to pursue her many other community efforts. She has done an outstanding job of being Treasurer and making very efficient financial reports for the past three years. We will greatly miss her smiling face and pleasant manner on our Board.

The annual series of walking tours of Lafayette for the fourth-grade schoolchildren will take place again in early May. Collette Means is coordinating this event with the help of teachers and LHS volunteers. Later in the year we hope to put together a Lafayette city tour geared to adults and enlarge on some of the places to visit of historic interest and significance. This year we will try to record the tour on video tape for our files.

I hope to see you and chat again at our dinner meeting on May 14.

Best regards,

Ollie –

Oliver D. Hamlin

APPLAUSE FOR HARRE DeMORO

A roomful of enthusiastic listeners came to hear railroadiana expert Harre De Moro's informative talk at our March 12 meeting.

De Moro's life-long interest in the subject and his careful research into the beginnings of the roads, their perennial financial difficulties, and the role they played in local people's lives made for a very interesting program. Many in the crowd of 65 to 70, for instance, remembered the excitement he described in riding a train at full throttle across unpopulated valley lands – not so long ago. A lively question-and-answer period followed his talk.

A noted *San Francisco Chronicle* writer, De Moro has also authored a number of books focusing on railroads and the West. >

WALKING TOURS

In May Lafayette fourth-grade students will walk through Lafayette's history, visiting the sites, hearing the stories, learning about the people that came here in the early days.

The local history program is energetically headed this year by Collette Means, of LHS, and Mary McCosker, representing the Lafayette School Board. This year's team of volunteer guides includes Fran Dibble, Ruth Dyer, Julie Ling, Dorothy Nelson, Ruby Sturman, Mary Lou Van Galder, and Bill Wakeman. We thank them all for helping to make the program a success.

Bill Wakeman and other members of the Society are working on plans to provide an adult tour soon. More on this later. >

1990–1991 OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS

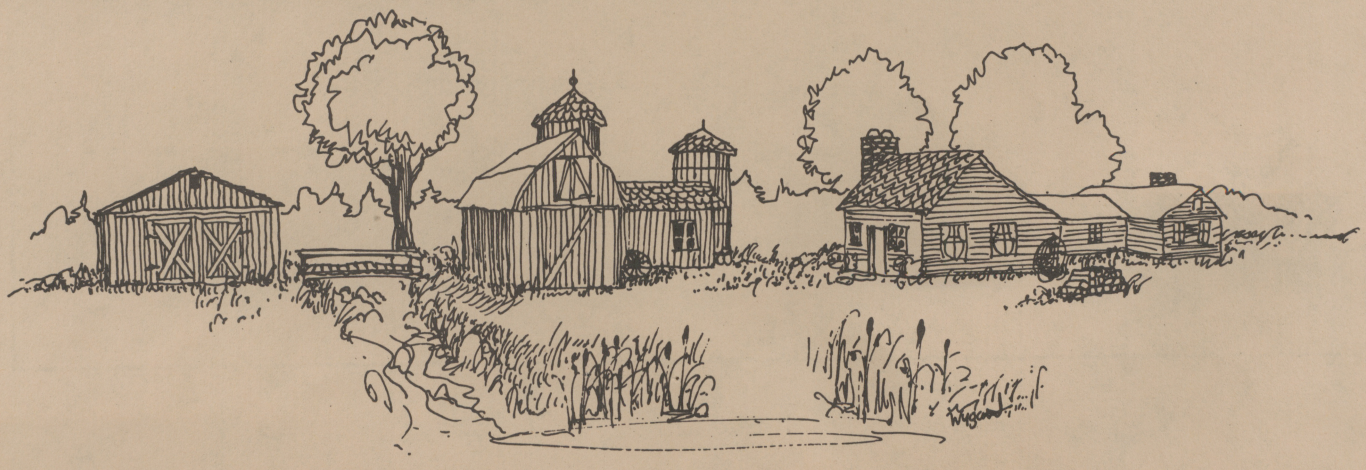
President	*Oliver Hamlin*
Vice President	*Ray Peters*
Treasurer	*Nancy Holtzapple*
Recording Secretary	*Ruth Dyer*
Corresponding Secretary	*Jack Bailey*
Annual Potluck Dinner	*Richard Johnson*
Archives / Hist. Displays	*Bill & Irma Somerton*
Book Sales	*Ruth Dyer*
Fire Engine	*George Wasson*
Landmarks	*Bill Wakeman*
	Bob & Collette Means
Membership	*Jack & Barbara Bailey*
Oral History	*George Wasson*
Newsletter	*Shirley Thomson*
Program	*Jop & Irene Van Overveen*
Publicity	*Bill Somerton*
Walking Tours	*Collette Means*
(Without portfilio)	*GeorgeEly*

DUES

Family Membership	*$10.00*
Student Membership	*$2.50*
Life Membership	*$100.00*
Business Membership	*$50.00*

IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN . . .

Payment of $10 for a family membership will keep your name on our active membership list for 1991. Send your check, payable to LHS, to Lafayette Historical Society, P.O. Box 133, Lafayette 94549. >



Annual Meeting and Potluck Dinner

Featuring
Nilda Rego — Local Journalist and History Feature Writer
to Speak on Local History

Tuesday, May 14, 1991
Lafayette Veterans Hall — Mt. Diablo Boulevard at First Street

6:00 Refreshments and Social Hour
7:00 Dinner
8:00 Program

Please bring a dish of six to eight servings for each person attending.
Hearty salads, meat or seafood entrees, and side dishes are needed.
Please also bring your own serving utensils.
Board members are to bring desserts (finger-food, please).
Dinner drinks will be provided.

OLD-TIME TRAIN RIDES

For those interested in riding some of the old trains described by Harre De Moro at the March progam meeting, a visit to Rio Vista Junction and the Western Railway Museum will be just the thing for a spring weekend.

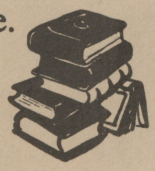
You can ride the trains all day for the price of the entrance fee. On a single day you may ride up to four different antique electric railway cars, visit the elegant Pullman cars, tour the carbarns, and talk with the volunteers busy restoring old equipment. >

FLL BOOK SALES

The Book Room—operated by Friends of the Lafayette Library—is now open on the first and third Saturdays of each month, 9 a.m. to noon, at the Lafayette Community Center, 500 St. Mary's Road.

There's great browsing and shopping in the wide-ranging collection—different every time— and the bargains are unbeatable.

Next sale dates: April 6 and 20 and May 4 and 18. >



The Temescal Adventue
Excerpted from
HISTORY OF CONTRA COSTA COUNTY
W. A. Slocum & Co., Publishers, 1882

(Annotated by Ray Peters)

The following graphic description of the experiences of a gentleman in a temescal, we give to the reader as a truthful and racily told adventure:

> A sweat-house is of the shape of an inverted bowl, and is generally about forty feet in diameter at the bottom, and is built of strong poles and branches of trees, covered with earth to prevent the escape of heat. There is a small hole near the ground, large enough for Diggers to creep in, one at a time, and another at the top to give out the smoke. When a dance [is proposed], a large fire is kindled at the center of the edifice, and the crowd assembles, the white spectators crawling in and seating themselves anywhere out of the way. The apertures, both above and below are then closed, and the dancers take their positions.
>
> Four and twenty squaws, *en dishabille*, [take their positions] on one side of the fire, and as many hombres, *in puris naturalibus*, on the other. Simultaneously with the commencement of the dancing, which is a kind of shuffling hobble-de-hoy, the "music" bursts forth. Yes, music fit to raise the dead. A whole legion of devils broke loose. Such screaming, shrieking, yelling and roaring was never before heard since the foundation of the world. A thousand cross-cut saws, filed [fired] by steam power—a multitude of tom cats lashed together and flung over a clothes-line—innumerable pigs under a gate—all combined would produce a heavenly melody compared with it. Yet this uproar, deafening as it is, might possibly be endured, but another sense soon comes to be saluted. Talk of the thousand stinks of the 'City of Cologne.' Here are at least forty thousand combined in one grand overwhelming stench, and yet every particular odor distinctly definable. Round about the roaring fire the Indians go capering, jumping and screaming, with the perspiration streaming from every pore. The spectators look on until the air grows thick and heavy, and a sense of oppressing suffocation overcomes them, when [then] they make a simultaneous rush at the door for self-protection. Judge their astonishment, terror and dismay to find it fastened securely—bolted and barred on the outside. They rush frantically around the walls in hope to discover some weak point through which they may find egress, but the house seems to have been constructed purposely to frustrate such attempts. More furiously than caged lions, they

"SLOCUM" EXCERPTS . . .

A short piece taken from the 1882 Slocum history of Contra Costa County is reprinted here. This piece, as was an earlier one published in 1990, was submitted for our use by Ray Peters; he was delighted to find this wildly vivid passage. Clarifying notations in brackets are Ray's.

The Indian sweathouse ceremony described by an unnamed gentleman in a long quote in the Slocum book is written in exclamations, exaggerations, and some unconscious cultural bias. It's not "Dances with Wolves," but it is firsthand, local, and informing.

"Slocum" is available through the Contra Costa County Historical Society. Both the book and a useful index to it—recently published by CCCHS's Bernard Freedman—can be purchased at the History Center; call the Center at 939-9180. Ed.

"Temescal" excerpt, continued . . .

rush bodily against the sides but the stout poles resist every onset.

There is no alterative but to sit down, in hopes that the troop of naked fiends will soon cease from sheer exhaustion. Vain expectation! The uproar but increases in fury, the fire waxes hotter and hotter, and they seem to be preparing for fresh exhibitions of their powers. The combat deepens. On ye brave! See that wild Indian, a newly elected captain, as with glaring eyes, blazing face, and complexion like that of a boiled lobster, he tosses his arms wildly aloft as in pursuit of imaginary devils, while rivers of perspiration roll down his naked frame. Was ever the human body thrown into such contortions before? Another effort of that kind, and his while vertebral column must certainly come down with a crash! Another such convulsion, and his limbs will assuredly be torn asunder, and the disjointed members fly to the four points of the compass! Can the human frame endure this much longer? The heat is equal to that of a bake-oven; temperature five hundred degrees Fahrenheit! Pressure of steam one thousand pounds to the square inch! The reeking atmosphere has become almost palpable, and the victimized audience are absolutely gasping for life. Millions for a cubic inch of fresh air! This is terrible. To meet one's fate among the white caps of the lake, in a swamped canoe, or to sink down on the bald mountain's brow, worn out by famine, fatigue and exposure, were glorious; but to die here suffocating in a solution of human perspiration, carbonic acid gas and charcoal smoke, is horrible! The idea is absolutely appalling. But there is no avail. Assistance might as well be sought from a legion of unchained imps as from a troop of Indians maddened by excitement.

Death shows his visage not more than five minutes distant. The fire glimmers away leagues off. The uproar dies in the subdued rumble of a remote cataract, and respiration becomes slower and more labored. The whole system is sinking into utter insensibility, and all hope of relief has departed, when suddenly, with a grand triumphal crash, similar to that with which the ghosts closed their orgies when they doused the lights and started in pursuit of Tam O'Shanter and his old gray mare, the uproar ceases, and the Indians vanish through an aperture opened for that purpose. The half-dead victims to their own curiosity [the visitors] dash through it like an arrow, and in a moment more are drawing in whole buckets full of the cold, frosty air, every inhalation of which cuts the lungs like a knife, and thrills the system like an electric shock. They are in time to see the Indians plunge headlong into the ice-cold water of a neighboring stream, and crawl out and sink down on the banks, utterly exhausted. This is the last act of the drama, the grand climax, and the fandango is over. >

ROTATING HISTORY DISPLAYS

Bill and Irma Somerton have prepared a new historical display featuring the Design Project. It can be seen in the display case in Lucky's west wall in Plaza Center.

Plans are in the works for a new display featuring history of the railroads of the area.

If you missed seeing earlier displays, you will find them available to the public at the Lafayette branch of San Francisco Federal. >

ANNUAL MEETING AND POTLUCK DINNER
Tuesday, May 14, 1991 – Lafayette Veterans Hall
Nilda Rego to Speak
6:00 Social Hour – 7:00 Dinner – 8:00 Program

NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT

The committee, chaired this year by Shirley Thomson, is pleased to place in nomination for four openings on the Board of Directors the names of Marechal Duncan, Bill/Irma Somerton, Bill Wakeman, and Jack Bailey. Nancy Holtzapple's departure from the Board is reluctantly accepted and her good work gratefully acknowledged.

Many will already know Marechal Duncan. With undergraduate and M.B.A. degrees from UC Berkeley, he is an engineer retired from Motorola Corp. who's lived in Lafayette for thirty-four years. His children grew up here and attended Lafayette schools; he's been active in Boy Scouts and youth baseball leagues, and his wife, Doris, active in PTA and other community organizations. Happily, he's willing to take an active role in LHS.

The other nominees – Bill and Irma Somerton, Bill Wakeman, and Jack Bailey – are completing their first terms and are willing to serve another. Each has done fine work, generously contributing time and effort to LHS and its programs. >

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, California 94549

FIRST CLASS MAIL